

SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY | 14.04.2019

Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Philippians 2: 5-11, Luke 22: 14-end of 23

Status. Right now it seems to be the word of the moment. In immigration matters it is all about who has the right to settle in the UK - and in the case of ISIS members whether we have the right to take that status away. In European politics we are discussing endlessly our status at the expiry of Article 50: what will our relationship be with our neighbours – in May or October?

But of course it has much more personal applications - from our achievements at school or college, our position or rank at work and those honours which are so sought after by some, elections to professional bodies, clubs - or even to the House of Lords! Some seek distinctive titles that come with all those things; some, like the Masons, the prestige of a secret society.

St Paul, languishing in prison when he wrote this letter to the Philippians, is recalling a city which was particularly status ridden. It had backed the right horses in the Roman civil wars and had become one of the great centres of the Empire. It wore its medals with huge pride and its elite were ruthless in the pursuit of excellence at every level – commercial, military and social. Everything was about power, honour and status.

And Paul wants to challenge all that – but from the worst possible vantage point. For the upwardly mobile Philippians, to be a prisoner was a sign of defeat and failure. And if it wasn't Paul's fault (and they weren't certain about that), then perhaps it was God's fault that he had not been strong enough to prevent Paul from being locked up.

This passage, which we think became an early Christian hymn, is a vital piece of Paul's teaching - one that is wholly appropriate for us to reflect on as we move into Holy Week together.

Paul starts off by reflecting on who Jesus is. Like the great Prologue to St John's Gospel, Paul spells out that Jesus was God from the very beginning: *he had the very same nature as God.*

But instead of proudly reveling in that position and looking for every opportunity to be upwardly mobile, Jesus demonstrates what God is really about and he renounces it all.

The Greek word for this is *kenosis*: the emptying out: that which is full now has no content. As a human being Jesus has no divine power - nothing of the godhead about him at all. He is not even to be regarded as a servant (diakonos) but as a slave (doulos). And no good Philippian would ever associate with slaves.

But it is in such society, Paul says, that we will find the authentic Jesus, down among the poor and the powerless. They need to learn that God's game plan is the very opposite of what the people of Philippi were familiar with: instead of taking on the world of power, intrigue and competition with even greater resources of status and influence, God's nature is to give it all away – to love and to put others before himself. And the only way that could be achieved was through suffering and selflessness.

And ultimately the greatest humiliation of all, death on a Cross.

For Romans, a public execution of this sort was the epitome of a lack of status. For Paul, it is the most potent example of the divine character of both God who made it his plan from the very beginning, and Jesus who submitted to that plan, a course that would ultimately lead to a new kind of glory.

Not the vanity of titles and prestige, posh seats and fame. What Jesus is given - because he perfectly lived out the life of God - is the only title that matters: *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.*

Perfect obedience, perfect love, perfect submission to the will of God, perfect reaching out to those in need, perfect compassion and his perfect willingness to die for sinful humanity. No power games, no exploitation, no craving for attention.

And because Christ is now the Lord of the Universe and is Lord of all, Caesar – and every human seat of power that would come after him – cannot be the final authority.

Our task this Holy Week? To take to heart the 'other way'. It is not our status that counts but our willingness to share Jesus' *kenosis*, emptied of the selfish desire to be 'top dog' and all that prevents us from humbly serving those whom God loves.